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FM AMEMBASSY ATHENS

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2953

INFO RUEHDL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RHMFISS/EUCOM POLAD VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ATHENS 001698

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PREL ASEC SOCI PHUM GR

SUBJECT: GREEK RIOTS: SETTLING IN FOR THE LONGER-TERM

REF: ATHENS 1692 AND PREVIOUS

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (SBU) Levels of rioting and violence have increased in localized areas of Athens, and anarchists are clearly trying to injure or kill police and state security officials. Rioters have sought to increase further their visibility by placing banners on the Acropolis and attempting to burn down (for the second time) the city's Christmas tree in Syntagma square. They also attacked the French Institute on 12/19. We assess that the violence may be shifting to a longer-term phenomenon. To date, no U.S. government facilities have been damaged, and we are unaware of any injuries to U.S. citizens. End Summary.

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Harming the Police  
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¶2. (SBU) After a lower operational tempo for a few days, rioting in certain hotspots in central Athens increased December 18 in a day that many Greek contacts considered among the worst recent days of violence and destruction. Striking civil servants closed government offices and the Athens airport for several hours. A demonstration near central Syntagma square became violent when anarchists joined the group and began to challenge police with Molotov cocktails and rocks. When protestors attempted to burn down the City of Athens' Christmas tree (which had been hastily replaced after the first tree was destroyed in the previous weekend's violence), riot police intervened.

¶3. (SBU) Several recent events indicate that the anarchists are actively seeking to injure police and security forces. In one incident, anarchists set fire to a police bus with the driver still inside, and blocked him from exiting the burning bus. The driver was eventually able to escape. In a recent attack on the building housing Greece's VIP protection police units, a police officer was seriously injured when hit directly in the face by a Molotov cocktail. Rumors abound that anarchist blogs and SMS messages encouraged those participating to harm or kill police officers. Contacts in the police force confirm that significant numbers of police officers have been injured.

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Another Attack on a Teenager?  
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¶4. (SBU) Later in the day, there were also inchoate reports that a 16-year-old boy had been "shot" in the Peristeri area of town, leading to protests in that area. Although the facts of the incident remain unclear, it appears that the boy

-- whose father is a teacher and affiliated with the Communist Party (KKE) -- was shot in the hand by an airgun while standing on a street corner with friends. He has now had an operation, and the prognosis is positive. Police officials have stated that there were no officers in the area at the time of the incident. Nevertheless, demonstrations were held in the neighborhood last night, and additional demonstrations are scheduled for today.

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Higher Visibility  
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15. (SBU) Beyond continuing demonstrations, protesters also have been seeking to increase their already high profile by placing banners on the Acropolis on December 17 that called for a December 18 "Europe wide protest" and "revolution" and "resistance." The images of protestors and their banners at the Acropolis were widely carried in Greece and throughout Europe.

16. (SBU) Meanwhile, Alexis Tsipras, President of leftist coalition SYRIZA -- the party that has most actively encouraged continued demonstrations -- called for the "center of the struggle to move from show windows to schools and universities."

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Attack on French Institute  
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17. (SBU) On 12/19 at approximately 12:00 (local), about 20 youth attacked the French Institute, which is located in the

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Exarchia area of Athens. They attacked the police guard and threw fire bombs at the building and broke several windows. No students were in the building at the time, and no injuries were reported. However, this represents the first time that a diplomatic building has been attacked.

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Settling In For the Longer-Term?  
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18. (SBU) Although many Greeks had expected the rioting to peter out around the Christmas holidays, it is becoming increasingly clear that those behind the demonstrations and violence are settling in for the longer-term. Although the level of violence and number of incidents has fluctuated with downward trends, there have been significant incidents in localized areas each day since the riots began, and occasional days of increase in violence such as December 18. We assess that we will see continued protests and violence in these localized areas longer-term.

SPECKHARD